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ABSTRACT

Alcoholism is a disease that has been shown to affect not only the alcoholic but also the family of the alcoholic. The research on Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) reveals that the effects of parental alcoholism are not something that is eradicated once the child leaves home. This study examined the empirical evidence for characteristics of ACOAs developed by Janet Woititz and how these characteristics may differ between African-American (N=66) and Caucasian (N=72) women. The Children of Alcoholics Screening Test was administered to identify persons from alcoholic homes. The 13 characteristics of adult children of alcoholics, described by Janet Woititz, were put into a format using a 5-point Likert type rating scale. The scale was then used to determine whether the ACOAs and non-ACOAs in this sample would identify with this symptomatology. The results indicated no significant difference in the way African-American and Caucasian women ACOAs responded to the 13 characteristics. The empirical results in this study concur with the non-empirical literature: the adult children of alcoholics in this study were different from non-adult children of alcoholics. Both African-American and Caucasian women from alcoholic homes were different from African-American and Caucasian women who were not raised in an alcoholic home. (LLL)

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A Comparison of African-American and Caucasian Women Adult Children of Alcoholics and Non Adult Children of Alcoholics

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ABSTRACT

This study is concerned with the empirical evidence for characteristics of adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs) developed by Janet Woititz and how the characteristics may differ between African-American and Caucasian women. Sixty-six African-American women were compared with 72 Caucasian women. The Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (C.A.S.T.) was administered to identify persons from alcoholic homes. The 13 characteristics of adult children of alcoholics, described by Janet Woititz, were put into a format using a 5 point Likert type rating scale. The scale was then used to determine whether the ACOA's and non ACOA's in this sample would identify with this symptomology. Planned comparison revealed no significant difference in the characteristics of ACOAs between African-American women and Caucasian women. There was a significant difference at the .001 level between women who were ACOAs and women who were not ACOAs.

INTRODUCTION

Alcoholism is a disease that has been shown to affect not only the alcoholic but also the family of the alcoholic (Phillips, Martin, & Martin, 1987). As members of alcoholic families, children learn behaviors that allow them to survive in an alcoholic environment. Black (1983) identified three rules that children learn to help them in dealing with their inconsistent family life. The alcoholic family rules center around not talking about problems, especially the problem of alcoholism, a denial of feelings, and a lack of trust in others. Children from alcoholic families also adopt roles that enable them to survive (Black, 1981; Woititz, 1983). The roles include the responsible one, the scapegoat, the clown, the adjuster, the placator, and the forgotten child.

The research on Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) reveals that the effects of parental alcoholism are not something that is eradicated once the child leaves home (Black, 1981; Wegscheider-Cruse, 1985; Woititz, 1983). The behaviors learned as a child, in order to adapt and survive in an alcoholic family, are seen as continuing into adulthood when they would no longer be adaptive. Woititz (1983) identified 13 characteristics of adult children of alcoholics that are an outcome of adaptation to the alcoholic family environment. These characteristics include not knowing what normal is, difficulty having fun, problems with intimacy, feeling different from other people, judging oneself without mercy, and taking oneself too seriously. These characteristics reveal how, as children of alcoholics, coping behaviors are learned and then are continued as the children grow and become adults.

An important problem with the research on adult children of alcoholics is its lack of empirical evidence. Woititz (1983) readily states that the characteristics do not come from a scientific survey but are based on "a consensus of statements that adult children of alcoholics have made about themselves" (p. 24). Also, the reader is given no descriptive statistics to enforce these self-statements. The empirical evidence we have concerning children from alcoholic homes compared to children from non-alcoholic homes deals largely with the environment of the alcoholic family in terms of cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, and other variables on the Family Environment Scale

(Moos & Moos, 1984; Peterson-Kelly, 1985). The empirical findings of actual personality characteristics usually center around personality characteristics such as those researched by Berkowitz and Perkins (1988): self-depreciation, impulsiveness, tension, other-directedness, directiveness, sociability, need for social support, and independence/autonomy. Yet it is the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics, as described by Woititz (1983), that are most commonly used in self-help groups and these that have the least descriptive statistics.

Another problem with the research concerning adult children of alcoholics is its lack of cultural differentiation. Research on alcoholism has been guilty in the past of not considering family dynamics and family theories; thus the alcoholic was treated alone while his or her family was often ignored (Phillips, Martin, & Martin, 1987). Now a similar problem exists under another guise. No study has separated persons according to ethnic group in order to empirically note whether the characteristics true for white adult children of alcoholics are also true for black adult children of alcoholics. "That counseling has failed to fulfill its promises to the culturally different has been a frequent theme voiced by minority group authors since the mid-1960s" (Sue, 1981, p. 3). It seems that guilt does not rest solely upon counselors but also upon researchers who conduct studies. They either do not indicate minority participation in their research findings or fail to include minority participation in their studies. Katz (1985) observed that "white culture serves as a foundation of counseling theory, research, and practice" (p. 615). It is apparent that current neglect to identify cultural values related to familial effects of alcoholism leads to grouping all cultures together and asserting that the characteristics identified in white adult children of alcoholics are true for everyone regardless of cultural background within this country.

The present study is concerned with an examination of the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics as formulated by Woititz (1983), whether they do in fact, distinguish between ACOAs and non-ACOAs, and how they may differ between African-American and Caucasian women.

METHOD

Participants

One hundred and thirty-eight women participated in the study; 66 were African-American and 72 were Caucasian. Among the African-American women 33 were from alcoholic homes. Thirty-five of the Caucasian women reported that they were from alcoholic homes. This determination was made from scores on the Children of Alcoholic Screening Test (Jones 1984, 1985) where a score of 6 or higher indicated that the individual had been raised in an alcoholic environment.

The age distribution of the participants was from 18 to over 50 years of age. Table 1 presents a distribution for both groups by age grouping. Years of education ranged from below 12th grade to graduate school. Table 2 shows a distribution of these data for each group. Table 3 presents a distribution of socio-economic levels for each group, determined from answers to the question "How would you describe the socio-economic status of your childhood family?" As can be seen, the majority of individuals in both groups considered themselves to have been reared in either middle or lower middle class homes.

Table 4 presents data concerning whether the participants considered their childhood homes to be rural, suburban or urban. The majority of Caucasian women reported their childhood homes to have been suburban, while for African-American women, the majority reported having been raised in urban areas.

INSERT TABLES 1, 2, 3 and 4 ABOUT HERE

Instrumentation

In addition to a demographic form, the research materials consisted of a consent form, The Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (Jones, 1984, 1985) and a survey of the characteristics of ACOAs as developed by Woititz (1983).

The Children of Alcoholics Screening Test (C.A.S.T.) is a 30 item questionnaire designed to identify children of alcoholics. According to Jones (1984, 1985), the C.A.S.T. is appropriate with adults as well as adolescents and latency-age children. The statements describe attitudes, feelings, perceptions, and experiences that relate to parental alcohol use. Participants respond either yes or no indicating whether the statements are true for them. Examples of the statements include: "Did you ever feel like hiding or emptying a parent's bottle of liquor?", "Did you ever encourage one of your parents to quit drinking?", "Did you ever wish your parent would stop drinking?", "Did you ever feel caught in the middle of an argument or fight between a problem drinking parent and your other parent?", and "Has a parent ever yelled at or hit you or other family members when drinking?" The responses are added to yield a total score. Six or higher affirmative answers identifies one as a child of an alcoholic. According to the test manual, Spearman-Brown split-half (odd vs. even) reliability coefficient is reported in the manual as .98. The content validity coefficient was determined to be .78.

In addition to the C.A.S.T., participants also completed a Likert type scale based on the thirteen characteristics of ACOAs identified by Woititz (1983). The statements describe feelings, thoughts, reactions, and attitudes which result from the experience of living with the family in which there is an alcoholic parent. Participants respond to these statements on a five point Likert scale format. The response choices are: strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree. Each item was scored and given points ranging from 1-5; 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Examples of the statements include: "I guess at what normal is," "I judge myself without mercy," and "I usually feel different from other people." Woititz (1983) wrote that these statements are self-descriptions of ACOAs. There has been, as yet, no empirical evidence to be found concerning these self-descriptive statements, however, part of the focus of this study is to determine whether these statements do, in fact, discriminate ACOA's from non-ACOA's.

PROCEDURE

Several midwestern colleges and universities, a volunteer parent group of the public school system, and several churches were contacted for permission to interview women. Once permission was granted, an examiner briefly introduced the topic to the women and gave the consent form. The consent form explained the purpose of the research and the approximate time needed to complete the study. After giving consent, the women completed the survey materials consisting of 27 demographic questions and the two questionnaires.

Participants remained anonymous throughout the study, were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any time.

RESULTS

Before addressing the results of each research question, the CAST and ACOA descriptive results are reported.

The descriptive results for the C.A.S.T. revealed that of the 66 African-American women who participated in the study, 33 (50%) were adult children of alcoholics and 33 (50%) were not adult children of alcoholics. Thirty-five (48.61%) Caucasian women were adult children of alcoholics and 37 (51.39%) were not adult children of alcoholics.

Woititz's 13 Characteristics of ACOAs

An ANOVA was calculated to determine differences between the four groups (African-American ACOAs, African-American non-ACOAs, Caucasian ACOA's, and Caucasian non-ACOA's) concerning the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics. Table 5 presents the means and standard deviations for each group's identification with the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics. Overall F was significant. $F = (3, 134) = 9.02$, $p < .001$, indicating that the scale based on Woititz's 13 characteristics differentiate between ACOAs and non-ACOAs for both African-American and Caucasian women.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

The following research questions were tested in this study. The results are presented in Table 6.

1. There are no differences in the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics between African-American and Caucasian women who are adult children of alcoholics. The null hypothesis is not rejected. A planned single group comparison (Table 6) was done and revealed no significant difference in the way the two groups responded to the characteristics of ACOAs.

2. There are no differences in the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics between African-American and Caucasian women who are adult children of alcoholics and African-American and Caucasian women who are not adult children of alcoholics. The null hypothesis is rejected. A planned paired comparison (Table 6) revealed a difference at the .001 level.

3. No differences exist in the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics between African-American women who are adult children of alcoholics and African-American women who are not adult children of alcoholics. The null hypothesis is rejected. A single group planned comparison (Table 6) was done and showed a significant difference at the .001 level. A Scheffe post hoc analysis revealed a difference between African-American adult children of alcoholics and Afro-Americans who are not adult children of alcoholics ($p < .01$).

4. There exists no difference in the characteristics of ACOAs between Caucasian women who are adult children of alcoholics and Caucasian women who are not adult children of alcoholics. The null hypothesis is rejected. Table 7 shows that a planned single group comparison revealed a significant difference at the .04 level.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

DISCUSSION

The results indicated there was no significant difference in the way African-American and Caucasian women adult children of alcoholics responded to Woititz's 13 characteristics. This finding agrees with the non-empirical evidence of Brisbane and Stuart (1985). Though the literature (Brisbane & Womble, 1985; Harvey, 1985;,, Dillard, 1983) discusses culturally different attitudes and tolerances about alcohol use, these differences, if present in this study, did not result in a difference in the characteristics of ACOA's between African-American and Caucasian women.

The results of this study also contradict the familial cohesiveness distinction between African-American and Caucasian women. Various writers (Dillard, 1983; Brisbane & Womble, 1985) described the influence of non-parental caretakers in the African-American family. Dillard described how several individual households may coexist within an African-American family. Although the present study did not address that issue, there were not enough individuals reporting extended family members residing within the childhood home to have assessed whether extended family members' influence affected the characteristics of persons living in an alcoholic home.

The results showing that there is a significant difference between African-American and Caucasian women ACOAs compared to African-American and Caucasian women non-ACOAs concerning the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics provides, for the first time, empirical evidence for the characteristics of ACOAs developed by Woititz (1983). Woititz stated that the characteristics were based on a consensus of self-descriptive statements. Woititz and many others (Black, 1981; Schaef, 1986; Wilson & Orford, 1978) have stated that adults raised in alcoholic homes are different from other people. One reason for this difference, according to Black (1981), is that the behavioral and affective skills used as a child to survive within an alcoholic environment

continue to be used after the child becomes an adult and has left the alcoholic home. The empirical results in this study concur with the non-empirical literature: the adult children of alcoholics in this study were different from non adult children of alcoholics. Both African-American and Caucasian women from alcoholic homes were different from African-American and Caucasian women who were not raised in an alcoholic home.

African-American women ACOAs responded significantly differently to the characteristics of ACOAs than did African-American women non-ACOAs. Also Caucasian ACOAs responded differently to the characteristics of ACOAs than did Caucasian non-ACOAs. These results further support the literature that there are differences in adult children of alcoholics compared to the rest of the population. Though this study did not examine the cultural differences of alcohol use (and abuse) between Afro-Americans and Caucasians, ACOAs from both ethnic backgrounds shared similar ACOA characteristics than when compared with women who were not ACOAs. This result implies that though cultural differences may exist between African-American and Caucasian women concerning the use of alcohol, some of the dysfunctional characteristics that result from living in an alcoholic home are similar.

ACOAs having distinctive characteristics from non-ACOAs also contradicts the empirical evidence of Berkowitz and Perkins (1988) and Werner (1986) who found little empirical difference between ACOAs and their peers. However, Berkowitz and Perkins looked only at young college-age persons and Werner's results were based on adolescents. Differences may occur based on age. Werner stated about the participants in his study, that "the maximum period of risk for mental breakdown for these young adults is still ahead of them" (p. 39). In the present study, the largest percentage (39%) of the women were between 30 and 39 years old. The next largest group, 27.5%, were between 40 and 50 years old. Only 5.8% women were between 18 and 22 years old and no one was under 18 years old.

Berkowitz and Perkins also concluded that the effects on the personalities of persons raised in an alcoholic home may be gender specific. The present study was concerned only with women.

Also, Woititz's ACOA characteristics were analyzed as a whole. While there may be similarities between ACOA and non-ACOA women within a given characteristic, there was not enough similarity to effect the overall difference when grouping the characteristics together.

More empirical research is needed on adult children of alcoholics in order to better understand both their childhood experiences and their lives as adults. The results in this study reveal that empirical research needs to be done concerning the correlation between culturally differing attitudes toward alcohol use and the characteristics of adult children of alcoholics. Also helpful in understanding the significance of the characteristics of ACOAs developed by Woititz (1983) would be a comparison study including both women and men. Further research also is needed to determine whether age is a significant factor in the self-perception of the characteristics of ACOAs. It was Black (1981) who described how children from alcoholic homes often leave their homes as young adults with a sigh of relief only to confront the meaning and correlation of their childhood alcoholic home with their adult behavior in years later.

Based on this study's results showing that African-American women and Caucasian women from alcoholic homes respond similarly to the characteristics of ACOAs as opposed to women who did not grow-up in an alcoholic home, it appears that women need more education and information concerning the effects of growing-up in an alcoholic home, and how to cope as an adult with the ACOA characteristics.

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Table 1

Descriptive Age Results of Participants

	African-American		Caucasian	
	n	%	n	%
18-22 years	7	10.61	1	1.39
23-29 years	12	18.18	9	12.50
30-39 years	19	28.79	35	48.61
40-50 years	13	19.70	25	34.72
over 50 years	15	22.73	2	2.78
Total	66	100.01%*	72	100%

Note:
* Due to rounding.

Table 2

Descriptive Results for Participants' Level of Education

	not high school graduate	high school graduate	some college	college graduate	graduate school*	total
Afro-American	2	8	35	13	8	66
%	3.03	12.2	53.03	19.70	12.12	100%
Caucasian	0	3	20	26	23	72%
	0	4.17	27.78	36.11	31.94	100%

Note:
*persons who are either currently (or were) in graduate school or already have graduated.

Table 3

Socio-economic Level of Childhood Family: Descriptive Results

	poor	lower middle class	middle	upper middle class	total
African-American	8	25	29	4	66
%	12.12	37.88	43.94	6.06	100%
Caucasian	1	26	30	15	72
%	1.39	36.11	41.67	20.83	100%

Table 4

Descriptive Results of Participants' Area of Childhood Home

	urban	suburban	rural	total
African-American	44	11	10	65
%	67.69	16.92	15.38	99.99%
Caucasian	13	40	17	70
%	18.57	57.14	24.29	100%

Table 5

Means and Standard Deviations for Woititz's 13 Characteristics of ACOAs

	Mean	S.D.
African-American ACOAs	39.55	12.57
African-American non-ACOAs	28.27	7.44
Caucasian ACOAs	39.91	11.46
Caucasian non-ACOAs	34.78	9.65

Table 6

Planned Comparison with the Characteristics of Adult Children of Alcoholics

Groupings	T Value
A X C	-0.15
A & C X B & D	-16.40*
A X B	4.34*
C X D	2.08***

Note:
A = African-American ACOAs
B = African-American non-ACOAs
C = Caucasian ACOAs
D = Caucasian non-ACOAs
* = .001
** = .01
***= .039